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RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0201  
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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT RAHMON'S "NEWS CONCEPT" -- A PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGY, A PROPOGANDA MACHINE, OR BOTH?

11. (U) Sensitive But Unclassified - Not for Internet Distribution.

12. (SBU) Summary: President Rahmon's chief information analyst announced plans to establish an "information center to manage the image of Tajikistan" and "a Ministry of Information to manage the licensing of electronic and print media" at media advocacy roundtables June 26 and July 4. The analyst said the proposals are part of a "news concept" President Rahmon endorsed April 30. The plans, developed without input from or prior knowledge of media representatives, are raising concerns about a consolidated effort to restrict and/or control the media. End summary.

13. (U) The presidential administration is proceeding with plans to establish two new government agencies as part of its "news concept" that President Rahmon approved April 30, according to Mahmoudkhon Sarayev, an information analyst in the presidential administration. The government had made no public announcement before Sarayev mentioned the plans during his participation in two roundtable discussions sponsored by media advocacy groups in Dushanbe June 26 and July 4 about access to information and dialogue between media and the government licensing bureau.

14. (U) During the June 26 roundtable discussion, sponsored by the Helsinki Commission to support unhindered access to information, Sarayev said the information center would fulfill the President's millennium development goal to integrate government structures into the "world of information" available through internet technologies. In explaining the dual purpose of the proposed center, he said the government's role is to "oversee the dissemination of internet information and predict who will attack the government and how." To make internet information secure against hackers, he said the center would promote the use of the Tajik internet domain ".tj" as an alternative to the Russian domain ".ru". The other purpose of the center, he said, would be "to maintain the image of the country," both inside Tajikistan and abroad. (Journalists' responses to the government proposal reported in septel).

15. (U) At the July 4 roundtable on media licensing sponsored by Tajikistan's Association of Independent Electronic Media (TajANSMI), the OSCE, Internews Network, and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Sarayev off-handedly dropped the news that a new state institution would take responsibility for licensing both print and electronic media. He said the new agency would unite all media systems in the country and that "it cannot be ruled out that it will be like a ministry of information." The Ministry of Culture currently issues licenses for print media; the State Committee for TV and Radio Broadcasting issues television and radio licenses.

16. (SBU) Comment. The news concept, information center, and plans to open a Ministry of Information took local journalists and media advocacy groups by surprise. When emboff asked Sarayev for a copy of the news concept, he said the official media had it, but state press representatives told emboff they did not have it either. When

emboff approached Sarayev a second time, he said he only had one paper copy left, did not have an electronic version, and suggested the MFA information department might have a copy. The reluctance to share a document that defines government media policy undermines confidence in the government's motives, and demonstrates the government's shortcomings in the area of freedom of information. No journalists or media advocacy groups were included in the planning, which adds to concerns that this may be a consolidated effort to restrict and/or control the media. End comment.

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